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DE RUEHDIR #0521/01 3411312

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FM RPO DUBAI

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0651

INFO RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC

RHEHAAA/NSC WASHINGTON DC

RUEIDN/DNI WASHINGTON DC

RHMFISS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC

RUCNIRA/IRAN COLLECTIVE

RUEHAD/AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI PRIORITY 0495

RUEHDIR/RPO DUBAI 0652

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 RPO DUBAI 000521

NOFORN

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/7/2019

TAGS: PGOV IR PREL

SUBJECT: IRAN: INITIAL REPORTS SHOW STUDENT DAY CONFRONTATION, CLASHES

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CLASSIFIED BY: Alan Eyre, Director, IRPO, State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Initial reports indicate that violent clashes between security forces and protestors are underway in Tehran, despite the government's aggressive moves to prevent anti-government demonstrations on Students' Day. Tehran University, typically the center of student protests, is reportedly quiet due to large numbers of riot police effectively locking down campus; however, protests appear to have occurred on campuses throughout Iran. Though the government temporarily revoked press permits for all journalists affiliated with foreign outlets and has shut down the mobile phone network and text messaging system throughout much of Tehran, the Internet is up, albeit sluggish and heavily filtered. Reports that at least two protesters were shot were picked up by Al-Arabiya, but have not been confirmed. Ominously, on December 7 the hardline Kayhan, whose editorial line is often aligned with Supreme Leader Khamenei, published an article online accusing the opposition's leadership of plotting to kill protestors and blame security forces in an effort to radicalize students. END SUMMARY.

Student Day: A Potent Symbol for the Opposition

¶2. (C) December 7 (16th of Azar on the Persian calendar), known as Student Day in Iran, marks the anniversary of the 1953 killing of three students by security forces at the University of Tehran. The students were killed protesting the visit of Vice President Richard Nixon to Iran, three months after the coup that removed Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and re-installed the Shah. In their death they became symbols of Iranian students' struggles against dictatorship, and despite efforts by the Shah's government to suppress Student Day commemorations, December 7 became an increasingly potent platform for anti-Shah protests for the rest of his reign, with frequent violent clashes between students and security forces. During the Islamic Republic, Student Day became a more perfunctory occasion during which senior officials typically visit campuses and give speeches about the importance of students and higher education to Iran's future. Though December 7 regained some its cache with the advent of the Reform Movement initiated by Khatami's election in 1997 and witnessed increased student activism following the suppression of student activists in 1999, today's 'Green Path' oppositionists are hoping to leverage the day's historical symbolism to keep the new "coup

government" on its heels.

Government Moves to Disrupt Opposition's Plans

¶3. (C) Oppositionists began circulating protest plans for Student Day immediately after the November 4 anniversary of the 1979 siege of the American Embassy in Tehran, repeating the now-familiar tactic of trying to co-opt politically potent events in order to maintain pressure on the government by demonstrating their ability to bring supporters into the streets. Similarly, the government responded with a cascade of warnings to would-be demonstrators. The warnings were accompanied by a series of aggressive moves by the government to disrupt the anticipated protests. Student groups and human rights activists report that more than ninety student leaders have been arrested in the weeks preceding December 7, and that university disciplinary committees have expelled hundreds of other students from around the country. In mid-November, prominent student activist Abdollah Momeni was sentenced to eight years in prison for participating in post-election demonstrations; his televised 'confession' is set for broadcast on state television on Student Day. In another move to intimidate government critics, on December 5 security forces broke up the weekly gathering of the family members of people who died in the post-election crackdown, arresting at least fifteen of the "Mourning Mothers" in a Tehran park.

Crackdown on Media and Communications

¶4. (S/NF) On December 6, the government revoked press permits

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for all journalists reporting for foreign media outlets from December 7-9 and forbade them from leaving their offices on Student Day. According to Dubai-based wire service reporters, their colleagues in Iran are effectively "locked down" and are relying on pre-arranged contacts in the crowd to follow events. However, mobile phones and text messaging are down, further exacerbating communications challenges. A service that provides television feeds to other media organizations reports its operations are completely blocked, and that the Internet is sluggish but operational though the VPN link they use to tunnel out through the government's filters is down.

Early Reports of Clashes

¶5. (C) Early photos and videos posted to the Internet confirm reports that the security forces are out in large numbers. Photos of the University of Tehran show the gates and campus perimeter closed off by riot police, with large banners blocking the campus from street view. Tabnak, a conservative website affiliated with Mohsen Rezaei, is also reporting "unprecedented" numbers of security forces around Tehran universities, with police also out on the streets of central Tehran re-routing traffic in hopes of preventing the much-publicized "green traffic protest" scheduled for 5:00 p.m. local. Bloggers and opposition websites are reporting clashes between security forces and protestors at several universities, including Amir Kabir and Sharif University in Tehran. Reports of the most violent encounters, however, are coming from off-campus in central Tehran, in particular the vicinity of Enghelab Square.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: Scheduled oppositionist events were slated for mid-afternoon onwards, so initial reports began trickling out late in the day. Though the virtual media blackout and disruption of the mobile phone network obscure our ability to immediately assess the events unfolding in Iran, anecdotal reports suggest that significant violent clashes have occurred, both on campuses and in the streets of Tehran. Mid-afternoon Al-Arabiya reported that two protestors had been shot; this has not been confirmed. While initial reports are vague as to the nature and extent of oppositionist activity and regime response, what is abundantly clear is that in the build-up to this day the government took extensive if not brutal measures to limit and disrupt oppositionist activities. END COMMENT.

EYRE